Chapter 1

Paris Labels and Designer Concepts

The Ascension of Cultural Studies
And the Deluge of Social Theory

Almost every week, the book review pages of the newspapers and magazines in most of the world's large English-speaking cities repeat a message that is rapidly becoming one of the intellectual axioms of our era: there is no longer any clear distinction between works of fiction and non-fiction. Hence, academics are only deluding themselves if they think that when they undertake research and write about society they are engaged in the pursuit of truth and knowledge. A recent Sydney newspaper review of a novel set in the French Revolution flags most of the currently fashionable terms and serves to indicate those views that are now in and out of favour.

In this age of postmodernist literary criticism, we are more than ever aware of the ways in which historical writing resembles the novel as one individual's reconstruction of an imagined past. Historians may seek to be as 'objective' as possible, but they are no longer under positivist illusions about the scientific pretensions of their discipline.

Behind the confidence with which such statements are made lies a movement that has been gathering momentum over the last decade. Over this period, academic circles throughout the West have become as permeated by Parisian labels as the fashion industry. In English-speaking countries the movement can trace its theoretical origins back to the mid-1970s when a number of academics discovered French theory. In the United States,
the most influential was the ‘Yale School’ of literary criticism, which embraced the poststructuralist theories of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. In Britain, much of the early momentum came from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, which housed the most enthusiastic English adherents of the structuralist Marxism of another Parisian, Louis Althusser. By the early 1980s both groups were in the ascendancy in their own areas but remained confined to a fairly narrow range of subjects: literary theory, communications theory and media studies, all places where practitioners could make a lot of noise but do little damage to anything further afield.

By the middle of the decade, however, the situation had changed very quickly. One of the early primers of the movement, The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences, was published in 1985 by Cambridge University Press. This was a collection of essays edited by Quentin Skinner that was designed to both record and celebrate what it championed as an iconoclastic group of theories and methods for the study of human society. Several of these theories were not new, the editor noted. Some had their origins in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By the 1950s and 1960s, he said, they had been rejected by prevailing academic opinion in most English-speaking countries and had then been ‘consigned to the dustbin of history’. However, in the 1970s and 1980s, new theorists breathed life into them once more and they re-emerged to ‘restructure’ the human sciences. Although in 1985, Skinner wrote, they had not yet toppled the main enemy — ‘piecemeal empirical research’ — they were nonetheless well on the way.

During the past generation, Utopian social philosophies have once again been practised as well as preached; Marxism has revived and flourished in an almost bewildering variety of forms; psychoanalysis has gained a new theoretical orientation with the work of Lacan and his followers; Habermas and other members of the Frankfurt School have continued to reflect on the parallels between the theories of Marx and Freud; the Women’s Movement has added a whole range of previously neglected insights and arguments; and amidst all this turmoil the empiricist and positivist citadels of English-speaking social philosophy have been threatened and undermined by successive waves of hermeneutics, structuralists, post-empiricists, deconstructionists and other invading hordes.\(^2\)

The stance adopted by Skinner was that of the outsider trying to break in but, even as he wrote, some of the key citadels had already fallen. Skinner himself at the time held one of Britain’s most prestigious social science posts as Professor of Political Science at Cambridge University. Similarly, one of his contributors, Anthony Giddens, was Professor of Sociology at the same university and one of Britain’s most influential sociologists. Other contributors were well-known American academics who held chairs of anthropology, philosophy and politics at such distinguished institutions as Cornell, Princeton and the University of California. Skinner’s metaphor of invading hordes storming in from the outside was misplaced. It was more like a coup by dissident courtiers from within the palace itself.

Since 1985, the dissidents have expanded their territory enormously. Although they still like to portray themselves as embattled outsiders, they are today the ones making all the running — devising the new courses, contracting the publishers, filling the new jobs, attracting the postgraduate students. The humanities and social science departments of universities in most English-speaking countries still employ a considerable number of old-style empiricists, but they are either too busy, too tired or too bemused to come to terms with what they see as a wave of alien concepts and terminology. The ‘restructuring’ celebrated by Skinner has proceeded apace and has now spread to all corners of the globe. It has found its most fertile soil in the American university system, where the speed of its growth has elicited comments of both amazement and envy from foreign supporters. For instance, at a conference that attracted nine hundred people, including a bevy of Australians, to the University of Illinois in 1990 to deliberate on one of these newly defined fields, cultural studies, the Professor of Sociology at Britain’s Open University, Stuart Hall, remarked upon the ‘explosion’ of cultural studies and cultural theory that he had witnessed in the United States.

I am completely dumbfounded by it. I think of the struggles to get cultural studies into the institution in the British context, to squeeze three or four jobs for anybody under some heavy disguise, compared with the rapid institutionalisation which is going on in the US.\(^3\)
In Australia, the academic strongholds have also been successfully stormed, and, as in America, the dissidents no longer feel the need to cover the appointment of like-thinking colleagues with ‘heavy disguise’. The new movements have now captured much of the intellectual high ground in the humanities, according to the University of Melbourne’s former Professor of English, Stephen Knight. In 1990 he described the position they had won.

In recent years the area of research that has been most prominent, attention earning and intellectually prestigious in the arts and social sciences area has been what is being called the New Humanities. Literary studies has linked up with aspects of linguistics, usually called semiotics, and together they have explored the social relations of culture, bringing in aspects of philosophy, psychology and history. Important work was being done in France; Gallic names like Foucault, Laced, Macherey, Derrida, flow like great wine brands around the lips of serious staff and students these days.

The Australian Academy of the Humanities, the body that represents all Australian university humanities schools, devoted its 1991 symposium to these ‘new humanities’ and to their call for the dissolution of the existing divisions between academic disciplines. The convenor of the symposium, Professor Ken Ruthven of the Department of English at the University of Melbourne, asserted that the organisation and its members must now take on board the ideas of this movement. ‘The credibility of any academy which claims to represent the humanities is dependent nowadays on its willingness and ability to engage critically with the new humanities.’

Down at the level of day-to-day undergraduate teaching in Australia, the story is similar. One could point to a proliferation of examples in the new universities created since 1988, but it is more revealing to show how the traditional institutions have succumbed. The once-conservative Department of History at the University of Sydney in 1991 introduced a new seminar in those theoretical developments that it said had transformed the traditional concept of the discipline. The seminar was compulsory for all students taking the honours stream, and was introduced as follows:

The old-fashioned concept of the historian’s task was that he (rarely she) ‘described what really happened in the past’. This notion, though still widely held, has been exploded by theoretical developments which have occurred largely outside the field of history itself. The work of social philosophers, anthropologists, linguists, scientists, political, literary and feminist theorists, have, from a variety of directions and with increasing momentum, exploded the old concept of history. It is no longer possible for historians to work in isolation from these developments.

Despite flattering endorsements of this kind, the ‘new humanities’ have not had it all their own way. A small number of critics have argued that, rather than intellectual prestige, these trends amount to intellectual catastrophe. The most prominent of these critics was the American philosopher, the late Allan Bloom, whose book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, argued in 1987 that radical theory had captured the entire agenda about how we in the West study human society and how we understand human beings as individuals. The results were that humanities and social science departments within universities had abandoned objectivity and truth and become hopelessly politicised. Most young people today were taught to scorn the traditional values of Western culture — equality, freedom, democracy, human rights — as hollow rhetoric used to mask the self-interest of the wealthy and powerful. This teaching, Bloom argued, had bred a cynical, amoral, self-centred younger generation who lacked any sense of inherited wisdom from the past. ‘The crisis of liberal education’, Bloom wrote, ‘is a reflection of a crisis at the peaks of learning, an incoherence and incompatibility among the first principles with which we interpret the world, an intellectual crisis of the greatest magnitude, which constitutes the crisis of our civilisation’.

In 1990, another American critic, Roger Kimball, wrote a book called *Tenured Radicals* with a similar theme to Bloom’s in which he underlined with more recent detail both how rapid and how extensive had been the process of politicisation of American university life in the late 1980s. He focused particular attention on the influence of the French theorist Jacques Derrida and his ‘deconstructionist’ approach to literature and language, an on how these ideas had infiltrated the teaching of literature, art, architecture and law. Like Bloom, Kimball saw these develop-
ments as ‘ideologically motivated assaults on the intellectual and moral substance of our culture’. An other celebrated response was Dinesh D’Souza’s 1991 book *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus*, a critique of the political correctness movement in American universities. Indian-born D’Souza provided a incriminating analysis of ethnically biased admission policies and of the ‘multiculturalist’ movement. The latter concept has been adopted by feminist studies and black studies in the United States to label the whole body of Western learning as nothing but the ideology of dead, white males. Multiculturalists want the curriculum of higher education to be rewritten from a ‘gender specific’ or ‘Afrocentric’ perspective. The central issue that concerned all three of these authors, Bloom, Kimball and D’Souza, was the preservation of the canon of Western learning; that is, the generally recognised body of great works that have stood the test of time and that, until recently, were acknowledged as central to a complete education.

In Britain, the influence of deconstruction also became a matter of bitter public debate in May 1992 when Cambridge University proposed to confer an honorary doctorate of literature on Jacques Derrida. In an unprecedented move against the bestowing of an honour that is normally done without question, a group of Cambridge professors challenged the decision. The issue eventually went to a vote of academic staff. The majority supported Derrida, but not before one of the forty percent who dissented, Howard Erskine-Hill called the decision a ‘symbolic suicide for a university’.

In France, there have also been signs of resistance. The main critics have been the philosophers Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, who caused a sensation in Parisian intellectual circles in 1985 with their critique of what they called ‘French Philosophy of the Sixties’. They focused on the ‘anti-humanism’ of four of the most fashionable French writers — Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Pierre Bourdieu and Jacques Lacan, who emerged as celebrities in the wake of the student radical movement of 1968. Among the central claims of anti-humanist philosophy were the impotence of human reason and the impossibility of universal moral judgments. It thereby rejected the concept of universal human rights and traditional notions of freedom and equality. Ferry and Renaut argued that the main project of the philosophy of the Sixties, ‘the total critique of the modern world’, was permeated by internal inconsistencies and was both logically vacuous and politically irresponsible. In 1987, another French publication, by Victor Farias, cost Foucault, Derrida and Lacan many of their supporters by showing that the intellectual mentor to whom all three were indebted, the German existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger, had been an anti-Semite, a Nazi informer on academic colleagues in the 1930s, and a financial member of the Nazi party from 1933 to 1945. While Foucault and Derrida thought his work pointed in radical directions, Heidegger himself continued to believe until his death in 1976 that his philosophy confirmed the ‘inner truth and greatness’ of the Nazi movement. While the political career of the founder of a school of thought is obviously insufficient to refute the theories of his disciples, it raised embarrassing questions about the political judgement of the disciples when they themselves proclaimed that all thought was charged with politics. In their home country, if not yet abroad, some of the ‘great wine brands’ of France are now on the nose.

There is one thing that all the so-called ‘new humanities’ have in common, despite the considerable differences among the gurus who inspire them. All share a similar set of views about the concepts of knowledge, truth and science and about the way that academic study has been organised into disciplines. On each of these concepts, they insist, the Western tradition has got it wrong. Let me outline the principles endorsed by the ‘new humanities’ to emphasise just how radical is the challenge that is underway.

**Knowledge:** These theories are united in the view that inductive reasoning and empirical research cannot provide a basis for knowledge. They challenge the concepts of objectivity and certainty in knowledge, arguing that different intellectual and political movements create their own forms of relative ‘knowledge’.

**Truth:** They believe that truth is also a relative rather than an absolute concept. The pursuit of unconditional truth is impossible, they argue. What is ‘true’, they claim, depends on who is speaking to whom and in what context.
Science: They claim that science cannot be value-free or objective. They also agree that neither the human sciences nor natural science provide us with what could be called knowledge. We invent scientific theories rather than make scientific discoveries.

Disciplines: Most believe that the traditional divisions of academic disciplines, especially in the humanities and social sciences, are inappropriate. The established disciplines should all become far more multi- and cross-disciplinary. The adoption of the term ‘studies’ reflects the new emphasis. Supporters of the movement advocate that, instead of being organised into disciplines such as history, law and English, teaching and research be reorganised into new, cross-bred fields such as ‘cultural studies’, ‘textual studies’, ‘women’s studies’, ‘peace studies’ and ‘media studies’. Some of these give the appearance of retaining a traditional discipline — ‘historical studies’ and ‘legal studies’, for example — but turn out on closer examination to bear only a marginal resemblance to the original, to which they are often strongly opposed.

Although they are beyond the scope of this book, it is important to recognise that there are other academic fields outside the humanities and social sciences that are affected. Several other areas have been just as extensively colonised, especially in professional education, where this is probably more damaging because of the greater practical consequences. Architectural schools, for instance, have now been influenced by these movements to the extent that architectural firms today see many graduates as ‘deconstructivist clones’, very well versed in postmodernist theory but poorly educated in structure, construction and budgeting and, as a result, barely fit for practice. In Australia, law schools including those at Monash University, Melbourne, and the University of Wollongong, have recently introduced courses in literary and cultural studies to address such issues as ‘legal fictions’ and ‘legal poetics’, while academic legal conferences now attract papers with such titles as: ‘Meta-language and the Crisis of Representation: Some Thoughts on the Law of Genre, the Discourse on Language and the Re-Writing of Law as Postmodern Fiction’. In the United States, professors of English literature, such as Stanley Fish of Duke University, have been appointed heads of law schools on the grounds that legal texts and lawsuits are, at bottom, nothing more than rhetoric. In a growing number of Australian art schools, students complain they spend most of their time on the theories of fashionable Parisians such as Jean Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard, but are not taught how to draw properly. Poststructuralist theory is even making headway in the unlikely fields of business management and accounting. No, I am not joking. In the United Kingdom and the United States, poststructuralist theories have formed part of the academic literature in accounting for at least five years. In Australia, Michel Foucault’s methodologies are now taken seriously enough to be taught to graduate students in accounting at the University of New South Wales. The newest field to be colonised is health and medicine, where a recent author, who lectures in an English medical school, assures us that our concepts of ‘the patient’ and ‘illness’ are ‘sociological fictions’ which can be expunged by ‘elements of feminist theory and Derridean concepts of difference and intertextuality’.

THE ASCENDANCY OF CULTURAL STUDIES

Without a doubt, cultural studies is the fastest growing area in the humanities and social sciences. The editors of a recent book of essays on the subject talk of its ‘unprecedented international boom’. Moreover, the growth of this field is not only a matter of intellectual fashion; it has also caused a dramatic redistribution of educational resources, as its supporters readily attest:

At the same time, it is undoubtedly cultural studies’ material and economic promise that contributes, as much as its intellectual achievement, to its current vogue. In the United States, where the boom is especially strong, many academic institutions — presses, journals, hiring committees, conferences, university curricula — have created significant investment opportunities in cultural studies.

Cultural studies is one of the more prominent of the fields to emerge from the French-indebted literary theory and media studies of the 1970s. Unlike the traditional discipline of English literary criticism, cultural studies does not confine itself to high culture. It is even more interested in popular culture, especially film and television. Overall, its adherents consider its
domain to be ‘the entire range of a society’s arts, beliefs, institutions, and communicative practices.’ Although the majority of its practitioners are former literary critics, the field is not confined to literary studies. In the United States, academics from cultural studies are leading a charge across almost every territory of the humanities: ‘media criticism, education, history, feminism, African-American studies, Latino studies, studies of indigenous and aboriginal cultures.’ In other words, this relatively new field is attempting to stake out for itself a terrain that includes the study of just about everything in human society. Though they sometimes admit they might be making a tall order, the advocates of cultural studies emphasise that there are very few limits to what they hope to accomplish.

Continually engaging with the political, economic, erotic, social and ideological, cultural studies entails the study of all the relations between all the elements in a whole way of life.

Moreover, enthusiasts for the field see its growth accompanying either the transformation or the destruction of existing disciplines within the humanities. Despite being employed as Professor of English at the University of Queensland, John Frow has for some years expressed his dissatisfaction with the restriction of the study of English to high culture and has put on record ‘my pleasure that the discipline, in this form, has been falling apart for some time now’. Frow much prefers cultural studies, which he defines in the following terms:

Cultural Studies takes as its theoretical object the culture of everyday life, where the concept of culture is understood in a broadly anthropological sense, as the full range of practices and representations in which meanings and personal group identities are formed. Cultural Studies is concerned as much with the social relations of representations as it is with self-contained texts.

When the proponents of cultural studies write about the past they now have [begin page 15] few reservations about calling their practise ‘history’. However, they are usually careful to distinguish this from the discipline of traditional history, in which very few of them have trained. They normally claim that they an engaging in a new kind of interdisciplinary activity which redefines history a a version of cultural studies. The American literary critic, Professor Annabee Patterson of Duke University, North Carolina, described a recent collection of her theory-laden analyses of sixteenth and seventeenth century texts by authors such as Shakespeare, Milton, Spenser and Donne as ‘an experiment in the new interdisciplinary, cultural history’. She regards this work as a form of history because, as well as conventional literary works such as poetry and drama, she includes within her ambit a number of pamphlets, tracts and sermons written at the same time. Like the other literary critics discussed below who now define themselves as historians, Patterson believes that the study of the past is best done by approaching social practices and relations through textual analysis.

Part of the appeal of the focus of cultural studies on social practices and relations has been the opportunity this has provided its practitioners to take up political positions. The field has always been heavily politicised and the more successful it has become, the wider its political spectrum has grown: Indeed, some practitioners now complain that the politics of a number of their colleagues amounts to little more than personal opportunism. ‘Too many people simply rename what they were already doing to take advantage of the cultural studies boom.’ Broad though its political appeal might now be, cultural studies had its origins among academic radicals, and it still draws the overwhelming majority of its practitioners from the Left side of politics. Moreover, as Marxism has grown both intellectually unfashionable and politically untenable, leftists in English departments have been increasingly drawn to this new flame. ‘Certainly, within the fragmented institutional configuration. of the academic left’, the editors cited above observe, ‘cultural studies holds special intellectual promise because it explicitly attempts to cut across diverse social and political interests and address many of the struggles within the current scene’. One American literary critic, Catherine Gallagher, has argued that cultural studies has worked with both Marxism and feminism to achieve the goals of ‘making students of literature more aware of the history and significance of such phenomena as imperialism, slavery and gender differentiation’. Though it rejects some of the doctrines of 1960s Marxism, she says that much of this work ‘can be said to possess a remarkable continuity with certain cultural assumptions of the New Left’.
No discussion of the politics of this field should omit the impact of feminism. As academic feminists themselves never seem to tire of pointing out, discussion of the origins of cultural studies too often assumes that feminist theorists are ‘the dependent heirs of male intellectual capital’. In reality, we should acknowledge that feminists have made an independent contribution to the key assumptions. The American Marxist-feminist Judith Lowder Newton says that these have been:

... partly generated by the theoretical breaks of the second wave of the women’s movement, by feminist criticism of male-centred knowledges for their assumption of ‘objectivity’, by feminist assertion of the political and historically specific nature of knowledge itself; and by feminist analyses of their cultural construction of female identity. Since the late sixties, moreover, feminist work has emphasised the role of ‘ideas’, or symbolic systems in the construction not only of identities but social institutions and social relations as a whole. 28

Hence, whatever view we take about cultural studies, we should certainly go along with the demand of academic feminists that they share the responsibility for what is happening to the humanities and social sciences.

THE RESURRECTION OF HISTORICISM

Although cultural studies originated in Britain, it has produced in the United States a number of indigenous variations, which have made their own contribution to its development. One of the movements that became prominent in the United States in the 1980s is known as ‘new historicism’. The term ‘historicism’ originated in the nineteenth century to describe an approach to history writing and literary criticism that emphasised that each era of the past should be interpreted in terms of its own values, perspectives and context, rather than by those of the present. However, the term was taken over in the 1950s by Karl Popper and given a different meaning. In his book *The Poverty of Historicism*, Popper used it to describe belief in large-scale laws of historical development, especially those which predicted the future and saw history heading towards some ultimate objective. His particular targets were the works of Hegel and Marx whom he held responsible for providing the intellectual foundations of twentieth century totalitarianism. ‘New historicism’ is a term first used in the 1980s by a group of American literary critics who revived the original meaning and applied it initially to the study of the literature of the past. They chose the term partly to differentiate themselves from the literary orthodoxy of the 1950s and 1960s, which held that critics should ignore the context of the times and focus exclusively on the internal workings of the text. They also wanted to distance themselves from the Yale School, which, in the 1970s and early 1980s, had used the poststructuralist theories of Jacques Derrida to make a radical assault on the older criticism by arguing that the internal working of the text contained little more than ambiguities and ‘deferred’ meanings. The revival of historicism [begin page 17] aimed at providing a more socially oriented or contextual type of criticism. As such, it fitted fairly readily into the broad framework of the emerging cultural studies movement.

New historicism is of particular interest because it produced the first group of literary critics to bring their techniques to the writing of history. Of all the different perspectives now gathered under the umbrella of cultural studies, new historicism has gone furthest in the aim of breaking away from the discipline of English and colonising other territory. Coinciding with the five hundredth anniversary in 1992 of the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus, the critic Stephen Greenblatt, who had coined the movement’s name, published a history of the contact in 1492 between Europeans and natives entitled *Marvellous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World*. At the same time he edited a collection of essays, *New World Encounters*, written mostly by members of the new historicist group, about the European exploration and conquest of Mexico, Central America, Brazil and Peru in the fifteenth century. 29 Other practitioners of new historicism have ranged fairly freely across the fields of literature, history and social theory, from study of the works of ancient Greek historians such as Thucydides, to Enlightenment thinkers such as Giambattista Vico, and poststructuralist historians such as Michel Foucault. The editor of one collection of their works, H. Aram Veeser, has emphasised that their approach is taking them well outside the old confines of literary criticism and into almost every area of the humanities and social sciences. ‘New Historicism’, he has written, ‘has given scholars
new opportunities to cross the boundaries separating history, anthropology, art, politics, literature, and economics.\textsuperscript{30}

Despite their origins in a movement distinct from poststructuralist approaches to literature, new historicists have not engaged in any major intellectual critique of that theory. Instead, despite their hankering for social context, they have perpetuated virtually all the anti-realist assumptions that were already entrenched within American poststructuralist criticism. When they discuss their methodology, they insist that they do not regard the historical context of a work of culture to be something that is external to that work. They accept that we cannot speak of a social or material world being distinct or separate from the culture of the same period of history. Human beings, they tell us, experience the ‘world’ only through language. All our representations of this world are grounded in the values and politics of the time, that is, they are dominated by the prevailing culture or ideology. In one of the collections of new historicist essays, Louis Montrose, Professor of English at the University of California, San Diego, has insisted that we should not see culture and language as a joint category located at one pole, with history and society forming a separate category located at another, opposite pole.

The prevailing tendency across cultural studies is to emphasise their reciprocity and mutual constitution: On the one hand, the social is—Understood to be discursively constructed; and on the other, language-use is understood to be always and necessarily dialogical, to be socially and materially determined and constrained.\textsuperscript{31}

To translate this into English, Montrose is rejecting the view that we can distinguish between a work of culture and its social context. The social context is always ‘discursively constructed’, that is, it is formed by culture (or discourse) and is not separate from it. And language-use or culture is always ‘dialogical’, that is, it is a product of the social context since it is formed by the verbal interaction between people. Montrose says his view is compatible with the work of Jacques Derrida, which has always been concerned with the ‘ideological force of discourse’. Hence, despite its origins, new historicism should not be regarded as a critique of poststructuralism but rather as an extension of this movement into the ideology, history writing and social theory of the past. When they talk about

the social context of these expressions of culture, new historicists are referring to the non-literate ‘discourses’ of the past, that is, ideas about politics, law, medicine, science and so on. They see the world of human beings as one based entirely on language-use or culture. Hence, in their view, cultural studies becomes the proper method for the study of society.

Two of the key assumptions of new historicism, according to Aram Veeser, are ‘that literary and non-literary “texts” circulate inseparably’ and ‘that no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths nor expresses inalterable human nature’.\textsuperscript{32} He is arguing that we do not have access to any such thing as a real world, only to texts about the world. Moreover, when we study the past we can never discover any certainties, any ‘unchanging truths’, which we might once have called knowledge. The term ‘archival discourse’, we should note, is an attempt to define the archival research done by historians as simply another form of literature, that is, a text. The overall claim that Veeser is making is that literary critics and theorists are, in effect, no different from historians, and the work the former produce is not merely analysis of the literature of past eras, but history proper.

By discarding what they view as monologic and myopic historiography, by demonstrating that social and cultural events commingle messily, by rigorously exposing the innumerable trade-offs, the competing bids and exchanges of culture, New Historicists can make a valid claim to have established new ways of studying history, and a new awareness of how history and culture define each other.\textsuperscript{33}

This is a very audacious claim. It is not simply arguing that works of literary criticism that focus on the past add an extra dimension to our conventional view of what should be contained within the discipline of history. Rather, the denunciation of traditional history writing as ‘monologic’ and ‘myopic’ and the insistence that culture defines history, constitute an attempt to overturn the traditional concept of the discipline and replace it with another. Society is no longer a place in which material events occur but is redefined as a ‘cultural system’. Literature is no longer something autonomous, nor is it able to transcend its time by telling us about the universal predicaments of humanity. Instead, it is bound within the ideology of the prevailing cultural system. Works of history are
defined as ‘texts’ and thereby accorded similar status to works of literature. Overall, written history is reduced to a text that is nothing but the ideological expression of the prevailing cultural system. Debates about what happened in the past no longer need to be conducted by one historian discovering ‘facts’ that counter or contradict the views of another. The belief that there are ‘facts’ about history is no longer accepted as the starting point for debate, but is itself seen merely as one ideological position among several, hence the ‘monologic’ and ‘myopic’ tags. We are told we do not have access to ‘facts’ in any objective or permanent sense. Thus, facts become tainted offerings. Historical debate is reduced to conflicts within the ambit of literary and cultural studies, that is, to conflicts between different approaches to the study of texts.

Behind the assumptions described here, that all we have access to are texts and that there are no unchanging truths, lie a range of arguments derived from a number of theories and philosophies that have risen to prominence at the same time as cultural studies. All have fed upon and fattened one another. The following sections examine these developments.

A DELUGE OF SOCIAL THEORY

What annoys the critics of history most is its lack of dependence on theory. The structure of most histories is narrative and the explanations usually made by historians are inductive. That is, historical explanations are based on the movement of events over time and their conclusions come from the evidence the historian finds during research into the subject. This is the opposite of a theoretical approach in which large-scale generalisations about human society or human conduct are taken as given before either research or writing starts. These generalisations or laws then provide a framework from which deductions about the subject can be drawn. Any evidence that might be brought into play is used to confirm the theory that has already been chosen. Traditional historians usually make some deductions in the course of a work, especially when they deduce the cause of an event from the range of possibilities provided by the evidence. But to draw findings from large generalisations or from anything resembling scientific laws is not part of the historical approach. [begin page 20]

Historians have long been chided for this by sociologists and social theorists, who cannot accept that such a thing is possible. One of the chief functions of this book is to study a number of cases where both historians and social theorists have examined the same subject matter and to see which approach is the more successful. In Chapter Seven, I also offer a defence of the scientific integrity of historical explanations as they have traditionally been practised. At this point, however, let us take the theorists’ argument seriously and put the case for their side in the strongest terms possible.

The really significant development of the past twenty years has been the publication of a solid body of theoretically self-conscious historical work which has progressively made nonsense of earlier conceptions of history as somehow, in principle, not engaged in the theoretical world of the social sciences. Social change is made by people doing new things. As the acknowledged masterpieces of the discipline of history become increasingly theoretically explicit, and as the unity of theoretical method between history and sociology becomes thereby steadily more obvious, the continued insistence of a rump of professional historians that theory is not part of their trade becomes steadily less firmly the effective basis of the ‘institution’ of history and steadily more plainly an ineffectual nostalgia.34

When he wrote this in 1982, the theories that Philip Abrams had most, though not exclusively, in mind were the variants of the predominantly Marxist-inspired explanations that were then in vogue. A decade later, however, the choice of theory is far wider and the decision for the historian who would follow Abrams’s advice is consequently much more difficult. The rest of this chapter provides a quick review of the most heavily promoted of the theories that are currently on the market. If historians should become more theoretically conscious, what follows is the range of offerings from which they can choose. One problem, though, which becomes clear from the following outlines, is that every one of the latest crop is quite hostile to most of the traditional assumptions and practices of historians. Indeed, the adoption of any of these theories into the trade of mainstream history would change the discipline in ways that would render it unrecognisable.
STRUCTURALISM AND SEMIOTICS

Historians have sometimes revealed themselves to be confused about the distinction between structuralism and poststructuralism. For instance, in the recently published history of the Department of History at the University of Sydney, there is a chapter entitled ‘Poststructuralism at Sydney’. Most of the discussion in the chapter — about theses and courses on heresy in medieval times, suicide in the seventeenth century, radical political cartoons in the nineteenth century, Ronald Reagan’s presidency and, wait for it, American rap music in the 1980s is about work that is more properly described structuralist than poststructuralist. Structuralism derives from the linguist theories of the nineteenth century Swiss academic Ferdinand de Saussur. Poststructuralism shares some of its assumptions but has different philosophic origins and assumptions, which are discussed in the section that follows.

Structuralism initially had appeal among literary critics because it provide them with something they had long felt they lacked; a theory of literature. Instead of being confined forever to studying nothing but particular works literature, literary theory became an attempt to study literature as a whole, means of studying what all forms of literature had in common. Saussure’s structuralist linguistics provided the initial model. Literary critics believe that, in structuralism, they had found a theory, or a poetics, that stood in relation to literature as linguistics did to language. Art critics were similarly enthusiastic for similar reasons. A theory of art at last appeared within their grasp.

In structuralist theory, a structure is a collection of laws or rules that governs the behaviour of any system. These laws themselves remain stable but they control individual components that are in a state of constant change within the system. For example, an economic system stays intact even though the economic acts that it enables and controls are all unique occurrences. Thus a structuralist would argue that the laws that govern capitalist society remain constant but the actions and decisions of individual businesses, corporation executives and workers are always unique and changeable. Though they are all discrete, these actions and decisions will always be expressions of the underlying rules. Even though the rules cannot be said to exist unless there are players who abide by them, the players are all nonetheless governed by the rules.

In the same way, the rules of language provide the system within which individual acts of speech are made. Saussure called this structure langue (corresponding roughly to the English word ‘language’), which is a system of signs in which the only essential thing is the union of meaning and acoustic images. He contrasted this with parole (roughly ‘speech’ or ‘utterances’), which is the executive side of language. The rules of langue, or of any structuralist system, cannot be said to exist in time. Their presence can be detected only through parole, that is, when they are expressed or uttered. Structuralism thus conceives of language as an idealised system, much like the abstractions of ‘beauty’ or ‘justice’. It is inferred from, but nonetheless thought to be independent of, the particular instances in which it is found.

There are at least four aspects of structuralist theory that challenge the traditional assumptions of historians.

The ahistorical character of structuralism. Saussure distinguished between the ‘diachronic’ (or historical) dimension of speech, and the ‘synchronic’ (or timeless) dimension of language. Because his theories dealt with language rather than speech, his linguistics was a form of study that omitted the dimension of time. For structuralists, the historic or diachronic dimension is merely incidental. The deepest understandings can only come from the study of the timeless or synchronic field.

The self-enclosed system. One of the main points upon which Saussure insisted was that language is a self-enclosed system. The meaning of a word, he claimed, is not the object to which that word refers. The idea of a ‘tree’ (the signified) has no direct connection with the word ‘tree’ (the signifier). Words or signs are arbitrary. They gain their meaning not from any connection with the real world but from the relationships that words have with one another, or more precisely, from words’ differences from one another. It is language, rather than any ‘real’ world, that structures thoughts, and thought that ‘signifies’, or gives meaning to, our sense of
reality. Hence the ‘real’ world can never be reflected in our minds and we cannot know things in themselves. We are locked within a closed circuit of signs or ‘texts’. From this perspective, it is naive to think that historians can accurately re-create what has happened in the world.

The critique of induction. The practice of induction, of looking at the records of the past, accumulating facts, and then using these facts to construct an explanation of what happened and why, is also rejected by structuralists. They claim there are no facts that are independent, so historians cannot be engaged in a process of induction; all they are really doing is deducing conclusions from within their own pre-existing theoretical framework. Nor can the historian claim that the discipline has its own methods of explanation and its own logic of enquiry. All of these involve making a clear distinction between the evidence used and the explanation provided, which structuralists claim is impossible.

The rejection of human agency. The anti-humanism of structuralism — or, in the jargon, the ‘de-centring of the subject’ — also challenges the historian’s traditional practice. Structuralism does not regard as important for the study of human kind the decisions taken by people, no matter whether, on the one hand, they are individual authority figures such as Napoleon, Lincoln or Stalin, or whether, on the other hand, they are collections of people such as political parties, military factions, trade unions or lobby groups of various kinds. Instead of the autonomous human subject, structuralism emphasises the languages and codes, and the consequent culture and ideology, that men and women bear within themselves, irrespective of their conscious wishes. In other words, human agency is ineffective; structure is all.

It should be clear from this why literary critics and others in cultural studies have embraced structuralism so readily. If all we can know is a set of linguistic conventions and products, literary theory and literary criticism become the most effective tools for the study of human kind. Moreover, in a period when Marxism had failed to account for the fact that its supposed agents of revolution, the workers, seemed happy to accept the capitalist status quo, structuralism’s emphasis on people being unconsciously dominated by the vast impersonal forces of ideology and culture came to appear more plausible to many radical academics. The French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss took the question one step further. He claimed structuralist linguistics could provide modes of analysis that were applicable to the study of all aspects of human culture and, ultimately, to the nature of the human mind. Linguists and social scientists ‘do not merely apply the same methods’, Levi-Strauss said, ‘but are studying the same thing’.

SEMIOTICS. The field of semiotics is usually regarded as a sub-category within structuralist theory. Semiotics is the study of meaning in human communications in all its varieties — spoken and written language, art, poetry, advertisements, gestures, facial expressions — which are all treated as ‘signs’. There are ‘formalist’ versions of semiotics, which have tried, unsuccessfully, to make the field into a rigorous philosophy or science, and ‘culturalist’ versions, which see semiotics more as a tool through which to approach literary and media studies. The most celebrated writer on semiotics has been the Parisian Roland Barthes, who analysed the political or ideological content of signs such as advertisements, magazine covers, fashion garments and motor car bodies and of activities such as serving food and wrestling. There are some Marxist structuralists, notably the followers of Louis Althusser, who have tried to use semiotics to show how signs impose meanings that constitute the underlying ideology of the capitalist system. This work was influential in media studies in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The term semiotics is not used as frequently today as it was a decade ago but Barthes’s methodology and interests (though not the formalist aspects of this theories) remain part of the mainstay of cultural studies.

TWO VERSIONS OF POSTSTRUCTURALISM

The term ‘post-structuralist’ originated in American literary and philosophical circles to describe some varieties of French writings that became influential in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In its original adjectival form it was a compound that bore a hyphen, but it has now passed into such common academic usage that both it and the noun ‘poststructuralism’ have
become words in their own right. There are two French theorists usually identified with separate tendencies within poststructuralist thought. One is Jacques Derrida, who holds a radical, textualist approach to the notion of ‘meaning’. Derrida’s version of poststructuralism is not a form of anti-structuralism. Derrida’s work shares some of the assumptions of Saussure but it derives principally from the existentialist philosophy of Martin Heidegger. Derrida follows Heidegger’s critique of the foundation of modern philosophy, that is, the philosophy developed in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. Because we are locked within a system of language, Derrida argues, we have no grounds for knowing anything that exists outside this system. ‘What one calls real life’, according to Derrida, is itself a text. Hence, it follows that all we have access to are texts. ‘There is nothing outside the text’, he has claimed in a famous aphorism. Where structuralist linguistics holds that language is not about the relationship between words and objects but between words and meanings, Derrida goes on to argue that there is no such thing as a fixed meaning.

The methodology most identified with poststructuralism is that of deconstruction, a term established by Derrida. Deconstruction is a way of reading texts and acts as a critique of both philosophy and traditional literary criticism. To deconstruct a text is to expose or demystify it. Derrida’s method is to analyse the ambiguity in some selected philosophical and literary works. From this, he purports to show that a text never says just what the writer consciously intended. He then goes on to claim that no text ever says only one thing, but, rather, creates many different meanings. Meaning is always relative since it is produced by its difference from other meanings. The meaning of a word is never stable; rather, it is always ‘deferred’. Therefore, he argues, there can be no reference from a text to any specific meaning inherent within the text. This approach has been used to undermine the assumptions of older literary critics that the job of criticism was to apply close reading and careful analysis to bring out ‘the’ meaning of a work of literature. It is also intended to undermine the practice of philosophy, which, Derrida claims, can no longer be based on a naïvely rationalist theory of meaning. Philosophy is essentially a literary genre and is best conducted not by rational argument but by aphoristic or poetic writing.

The other poststructuralist camp is represented by Michel Foucault, whose work is far more comprehensible to anyone educated in history than are the theories of Derrida. The histories written by Foucault about socially marginalised groups, including the insane, the sick and the criminal, are a less textual and a more worldly kind of poststructuralism. Foucault was also an historian of ideas. As Chapter Five discusses in more detail, Foucault followed the critique of the nineteenth century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche of the humanism of the eighteenth century Enlightenment, especially Nietzsche’s rejection of the view that history is made by the reason and will of the autonomous human subject. In this, Foucault’s ‘anti-humanism’ takes the same position as structuralism about the dominance of human agency by the structures of language, ideology and culture. Foucault was also a critic of the scientific method devised in the Enlightenment. Science is not something with universal application but, rather, is no more than a product of the ideology of its era. In the late twentieth century, he claims, there are no absolute concepts of knowledge that can be derived from science or any other ‘discourse’. No classification devised by either natural or social scientists, he says, can bear any direct relationship to an outside world.

One of Foucault’s central concepts is that of ‘power/knowledge’. The power of those in authority determines what is to count as ‘knowledge’ or acceptable discourse. He argues that the role of the historian should be to demystify the claims to knowledge made by the powerful and to support those who are oppressed by it. In arguing against any absolute concept of knowledge, Foucault adopts a poststructuralist position to claim that all classifications are arbitrary products of language, that there is no hierarchy of meanings, and that all we can do with language is engage in a kind of interpretive play. He acknowledged that the ‘histories’ he had written were not exempt from this critique and that they should consequently be regarded as novels or fiction.

THE VARIETIES OF POSTMODERNISM

The term postmodernism is used by a wide range of writers in ways that are often varied and, indeed, inconsistent. There are several authors who, while generally sympathetic, argue that postmodernism is not really ‘post’
at all, but is rather a variety of modernism itself.\textsuperscript{40} Others claim that postmodernism is part of the poststructuralist matrix,\textsuperscript{41} or vice versa. On the other hand, then are some poststructuralists, such as the English literary critic Christopher Norris who are well known for their hostility to postmodernism.\textsuperscript{42} To try to make some sense of these competing claims we can divide them into six separate versions.

\textbf{Nietzsche and Heidegger version.} These two German philosophers are often regarded as the most profound critics of modernism. They identified modernism not as something born in the twentieth century but as a project of eighteenth century Enlightenment philosophy, which saw history as the triumph of the rational mind over nature. Modernism regarded history as a story of ‘progress’ due to the accumulation of knowledge provided by scientific thought. Nietzsche rejected not only the idea that knowledge was accumulating but the very idea that the conclusions we draw from science or history could be grounded in any kind of certainty. He wanted to replace the whole of Western philosophy with a position that held there are no facts, only interpretations and no objective truths, only the perspectives of various individuals and groups. [begin page 25]

Heidegger rejected humanism and the rational domination of nature and called for a new mode of thinking that rejected Western philosophy and returned to premodern modes of thought and experience. Both philosophers adopted more of an anti-modernist than a postmodernist position, but most surveys of the field identify them as either the founders or the precursors of postmodernism. Certainly, their categorical rejection of Western learning is characteristic of most postmodern tracts.

\textbf{Paris 1980s version.} The French theorist Jean Francois Lyotard defines postmodernism as ‘an incredulity toward metanarratives’, by which he means a rejection of any general pattern of thought that claimed to explain society, especially the works of Marx and Hegel. Lyotard follows Nietzsche in this because the latter claimed ‘metanarratives’ were all products of Enlightenment or modernist belief in rational progress. Lyotard’s writings were attractive to many former Marxists like himself who saw Marxism go out of fashion in the 1980s and who wanted to find an alternative position that remained critical of modern society.\textsuperscript{43} Another former Marxist, Jean Baudrillard, argues that the radical intellectual must abandon the quest for rational explanation of society or anything else since ‘there is no longer any critical and speculative distance between the real and the irrational’. As I explain in more detail in Chapter Six, Baudrillard agrees with Lyotard about the end of metanarratives and subscribes to a thesis that holds that the Western world has now arrived at the end of history.

\textbf{Art and architecture version.} There are a number of versions of postmodernism that are found in art and architecture circles that are far less politicised and theoretical than the above two versions. In art criticism, postmodernism looks at a work of art not to discern a meaning that lies beneath it but rather to enjoy it for what it is, with no intention to be discovered, only the play of the work itself. \textit{Blue Poles} is nothing but \textit{Blue Poles}. In the practice of art, postmodernist works are usually based on a Nietzschean rejection of reason and progress, and exhibit qualities such as pastiche, parody and eclecticism. Postmodernist art rejects the signed ‘masterpiece’, the originality of the author, museum display, and commodification through galleries. It prefers mixed media and mass media. One of its favourite forms is the pop music video clip. In architecture, postmodernism has moved away from twentieth century modernist functionalism towards what it regards as ‘colourful play’ and ‘eclectic quotation’; that is, borrowing from several architectural styles and periods of the past, and assembling them at random in new buildings as a kind of joke at the expense of the untutored client.\textsuperscript{44}

\textbf{Literary version.} Postmodernist literary critics often condemn their discipline’s focus on the objects of high culture because this defines other works as low or inferior culture. Postmodernist literary criticism eschews the old elitism of a [begin page 27] canon of great books and, as in art criticism, approves works that display parody, eclecticism, playfulness and the deferral of meaning. Despite its egalitarian protestations, most postmodernist criticism is couched within arcane language and concepts and, moreover, most of it is concerned either with literary theory or with works of literature that sell only to an educated elite.
**Popular culture version.** This reflects a revival of interest in popular culture by some literary critics who want to incorporate its study within their field. Some practitioners of this version have used semiotics to deconstruct the representations and signs of popular culture to expose their underlying ideology. Some value the cultural expression of television advertisements and soap operas. Others agree with the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin that popular culture is a continuation of the ethos of the medieval carnival and should be appreciated because it is subversive of official institutions and hierarchies.

**Marxist version.** This is largely the product of the American literary critic Fredric Jameson, Professor of Comparative Literature at Duke University who believes that the current period is best understood as ‘late capitalism’. Jameson says that postmodernist culture’s amoral, uncommitted, though often attractive, eclecticism, is an apt expression of our current ‘social confusion’ because we are now in a ‘transitional period’ of capitalist development. However, this confusion will soon change, he claims, because the extension of capitalism into the developing world is now causing ‘proletarianisation on a global scale’. This will transform postmodernist culture into ‘class consciousness of a new and hitherto undreamed of kind’. In other words, for Jameson, the socialist revolution is still on the agenda. Though he has written a huge tome on the subject, Jameson appears to have generated few supporters, since postmodernists generally regard Marxism as the most audacious of the metanarratives produced by modernism itself.  

There are, as may be apparent, weak and strong versions of postmodernism. The weak versions are those usually advanced by art and literary critics and popular culture analysts, who often have considerable difficulty in establishing any significant difference between postmodernism and the modernist culture it is supposed to have replaced. Like the Australian critic John Frow, they normally speak in the vaguest terms of postmodernism originating from the current ‘proliferation of information’, from a ‘crisis’ among intellectuals in the 1980s and 1990s, and from the blurring of the distinction between high and low culture. Most of these claims are supported solely by reference to other postmodernist writers and very few are backed by anything so crass as empirical evidence. Hence there is little on which to assess their merit, an outcome perhaps not unintended. There are a number of American critics in the same vein, such as Professor E. Ann Kaplan, who is employed to teach English literature to undergraduates at the State University of New York, but who produces postmodernist, feminist and ‘oedipal’ analyses of such towering works of art as the rock videos of Madonna and the rebel yells of Billy Idol on MTV.  

The stronger versions of postmodernism are those that stick more closely to philosophy and social theory and see it as a phenomenon closely allied to French poststructuralism. This perspective would include within postmodernism Michel Foucault’s critique of modernity, the Nietzschean philosophy of Giles Deleuze, the end-of-history thesis of Baudrillard and the critique of metanarratives by Lyotard, plus some contributions by French Freudian feminists. This is the only intellectually coherent version of postmodernism on offer.

**MARXISM AND CRITICAL THEORY**

While other social theories have been advancing over the past decade, the appeal of Marxism within academic circles has gone in the opposite direction. Most of those who still remain faithful are middle-aged or older and, since the fall of communism in 1989, it has been almost impossible to recruit followers from among the younger generation. This is in contrast to the late 1960s and 1970s, when the leading Marxists had celebrity status among intellectually oriented youth. As the other theories described above gained support, some Marxists recognised how out of date they had become and, like the French postmodernists Lyotard and Baudrillard, threw off their old garb. Others have responded by adapting to the new fashions and incorporating what they would once have regarded as alien styles. For example, in the late 1970s, a combination of structuralism and Marxism offered by Louis Althusser was very much in vogue. In the 1980s, while there were some prominent Marxists — such as the former editor of New Left Review Perry Anderson — who were trenchantly critical of the poststructuralist movement, there were other even more celebrated Marxists — such as Terry Eagleton, Professor of English at Oxford University and one-time advocate of Althusserian theory — who defended...
poststructuralism and deconstruction from these attacks. As I noted above, we have even seen the unlikely merger, in the work of Fredric Jameson, of postmodernism and Marxism.

The version of academic Marxism to which most members of the ageing congregation now defer is called ‘critical theory’. This euphemism reflects how great has been the fall. It is like the Church dropping the name Christianity and calling its faith ‘religious theory’. Nonetheless, critical theory retains enough support to be ranked among the contenders. Those historians who are looking, as they have been urged, to make their own work more theoretical
cally self-conscious and more theoretically explicit should at least consider it as one of the still-viable choices on offer.

Though it is sometimes used today, misleadingly, to encompass all of the new literary theory, the term ‘critical theory’ has been most closely associated with the version of German Marxism produced by the Frankfurt School, which has been a shifting but identifiable group since the 1930s. This is a school that has abandoned a number of the central tenets of the Marxism written by Marx. Instead of a capitalism riven by class conflict, the school sees a stable, self-reproducing system with no significant revolutionary opposition. The working class is no longer seen as the prime agent of history. Socialism has become a utopian ideal rather than the imminent outcome of revolutionary praxis. The economic base of society, or the relations of production, no longer determine what happens in the social superstructure and so government, law, culture and intellectualism are all held to operate with relative autonomy. Yet, on the other hand, members of the Frankfurt School still accept a number of Marxist principles about the nature of the social structure and social relations. The targets of their criticism are those familiar to generations of Marxists: capitalism, commodification, consumerism, the media, commercial culture, imperialism, liberalism, positivism, patriarchy and the bourgeois family. They believe the capitalist system and the state have merged to form a great overarching system of domination and exploitation. They claim that once-independent institutions of civil society, including the education system, the Church, the media and trade unions, have been sub-

The leading figure in contemporary critical theory is Jurgen Habermas, who has spent much of the last decade arguing against the same target as the poststructuralists and postmodernists — that is, Enlightenment philosophy and social investigation — while also arguing against poststructuralism and postmodernism themselves. He is a defender of what he considers the progressive elements of modernism and, in contrast to the French theories, he believes it is possible to develop ‘objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art, according to their inner logic’. On the other hand, he shares some of the ‘anti-humanist’ assumptions of poststructuralism especially its critique of Enlightenment rationality, which he thinks is too centred on the individual reasoning subject. Habermas sees his big project as establishing an alternative conception of rationality based on what he calls ‘communicative action’.

Habermas wants to create a ‘paradigm shift’ from the philosophy of the Enlightenment, which he calls the ‘philosophy of consciousness’, to his own project of a ‘philosophy of communication’. The distinction he is making is actually a very old one. He is arguing against philosophies based on individualism and the self, and is supporting philosophies based on social interaction and the group. The philosophy of consciousness, he says, derives from instrumental rationality grounded in the drive for self-preservation. Instrumental rationality is the relating of means to ends without reflection on the rationality or justness of the ends themselves. He argues that this rationality, which had once been a weapon against superstition and tyranny, has today become a force that supports the rigid bureaucratic organisation of industrial society and that no longer fulfils an emancipatory role. So he calls for Enlightenment rationalism, with its focus on subjectivity and individual interests, to be re-placed by a more socially aware mode of thought. His philosophy of communication is aimed to generate action oriented towards understanding and agreement. As its name suggests, it is grounded in social togetherness and the binding power of language. Whereas the philosophy of consciousness fosters the individual’s domination of both man and nature, Habermas believes his
One of the consequences of the Habermas philosophy of communication is the production of his own version of the status of truth. Although he is a critic of the relativism of those poststructuralists and postmodernists who say that what is ‘true’ depends on the context and the speaker, a number of commentators have pointed out that his own theory leads also to a relativist position on truth. Habermas’s philosophy of communication commits him to the view that truth is not a relationship between an individual and the world. Truth is rather a form of agreement reached by rational discussion. What is true, in Habermas’s theory, is determined by ‘rational consensus’. However, this proposition is fraught with difficulties. How is a ‘rational’ consensus to be distinguished from a consensus derived from custom, authority, money or mob rule? The reply that Habermas has given is that a rational consensus is one reached ‘by the force of the better argument’; that is, anyone weighing the same evidence would reach the same conclusion. But this is hardly satisfactory. If truth is nothing more than consensus we can well ask what happens when, after weighing the same evidence, one consensus disagrees with another, as it so often has done in science, not to mention in far more problematic areas such as politics and religion? One of the principles of Enlightenment rationality that Habermas would thus overthrow, along with individualism and subjectivity, is the idea that the truth is something that cannot be altered by subsequent human influence. The Enlightenment believed that truth was something we discovered, not something we decided.

For historians, the debate over truth and relativism is obviously important. Most historians over the last two hundred years have accepted the view that the truth about the past is something independent of themselves. However, the current generation of social theorists, and quite a few historians today as well, believe that the past is not something we discover but something that each age invents for its own purposes. This position is taken not only by critical theorists but also by the movement called ‘postcolonialism’, described in the next section.
In the hands of some interpreters, postcolonialism is defined so widely that it goes well beyond writing by indigenes and people descended from the former slaves of the colonies. It can also include those European-descended authors in the white settler dominions of Australia and Canada who can be regarded as literary ‘outsiders’ or as writers identifying not with the main-stream but with the ‘other’ within their own societies, especially homosexuals, feminists and postmodernists. Postcolonialism is a term obviously in some danger of becoming all things to all its interpreters.

Given that there has been a powerful tendency within the literary criticism of the past decade for the critics to regard not the novelists, poets and dramatists but themselves as the true bearers of contemporary culture, those who have written about postcolonialism have similarly come to assume the high ground of the genre. This is despite the fact that most were born and bred in, and hold tenured academic positions within, such metropolitan centres as Los Angeles, Paris and Melbourne. The most celebrated of the postcolonialist critics is Edward Said, a New Yorker of Palestinian descent who has written two of the seminal texts, Orientalism (1978) and Culture and Imperialism (1993). In Orientalism, Said argues that European writings about the Orient, especially travel writing, literature and history, ‘had systematically disclaimed the insights of the people it claimed to tell the truth about’. The ‘other’ of the colonies were never permitted to speak for themselves. Much of the so-called objective knowledge about colonial peoples was nothing more than Eurocentric stereotypes that helped perpetuate Western dominance. In Culture and Imperialism, Said argues that the whole of Western culture of the past three hundred years has been moulded by the fact of European world dominance and settlement. He argues that the two principal cultural forms of this period, the novel and the historical narrative, have both been tools that were complicit in the imperialist project. He denounces a number of canonical works as culpable including, rather astonishingly, Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park, Thomas Mann’s Death in Venice and David Hume’s History of England.

One of the main problems raised by commentators on this movement is the fact that large segments of postcolonialist work have been produced within both the language and the cultural forms of the imperial powers they are supposed to have been rejecting. Rushdie, Naipaul and other authors from India, Pakistan, the Caribbean and Africa have not only written in English but have produced their ideas in the form of the novel, the quintessential cultural vehicle of imperialism itself, according to Edward Said. Similarly, the anti-imperialist writings of Frantz Fanon were written in French and derived their theory largely from Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud, two representatives of the German philosophic tradition. The Australian Aboriginal novelist and critic Mudrooroo Narogin acknowledges that his own postcolonial work is written in English, is read by a largely white audience and is couched within not Aboriginal but European cultural traditions.

One of those who tries to avoid this dilemma by making a total critique of the products of imperial culture, especially history, is the French author Michel de Certeau. Of all the French theorists who have been recently taken up in the English-speaking academic scene, de Certeau is the most radical. He is critical of the poststructuralist Foucault for his use of documentary evidence and of Derrida for the way he privileges the practice of writing. For de Certeau, writing is a form of oppression. Indeed, he argues that the practice of writing itself constitutes the act of colonisation. The principal form of writing through which he makes this charge is that of history. He has written a general methodological critique of the practice of history as well as his own versions of the nature of the first cultural contact between European explorers and the natives of Brazil and Central America. He has also written a theoretical account of the relations between people who possess writing and those who do not, as well as an analysis of everyday life in the contemporary world. His three main works written in France in the 1970s have been translated into English. They are The Practice of Everyday Life (translated 1984), Heterologies: Discourse on the Other (1986) and The Writing of History (1988). In other words, for someone who thinks writing is a form of oppression, he has done a lot of writing. While the breadth of his interests makes it somewhat equivocal to categorise him here simply as part of the postcolonialist movement, it is de Certeau’s theories that some recent postcolonial literary theorists have recommended to their colleagues as providing the most fruitful theoretical and political perspective for the field. The foray into
history by the new historicist literary theorists discussed above has been partly inspired by de Certeau’s work. In 1991 his new historicist admirers dedicated to him an issue of the journal *Representations.* A collection of their historical essays on the European encounter with the New World includes some of de Certeau’s own writing as well as an appreciation of his work.

Like both structuralist and poststructuralist theorists, de Certeau subscribes to the thesis that we have access only to our language and not to any real, outside world. From this perspective, speaking and writing are the vehicles through which we produce the only ‘world’ we can know. Of the two, writing is the more powerful. Writing, he claims, is a means of imposing a rational order. Writing produces a world, he says, that is consistent with its own grammar. Hence the only vehicle through which this world is intelligible is writing itself. Those people who lack writing lack the power to define their own world in the way that is possible to those cultures that possess writing. Outsiders never understand these non-literate peoples directly, only through the writings of others. Thus, he argues, the first writings by Amerigo Vespucci and others describing the people of the New World constituted the act of colonisation through the ‘discourse of power’. [begin page 34]

This is *writing that conquers.* It will use the New World as if it were a blank, ‘savage’ page on which Western desire will be written. It will transform the space of the other into a field of expansion for a system of production.

Because it sees things only through its own perspective, de Certeau claims that writing can never be objective. Its status is no different from that of fiction. So, because history is a form of writing, all history is also fiction. ‘The past is the fiction of the present’, he says. When historians write, they are not recording history; rather, they are manufacturing history. From de Certeau’s point of view, the whole enterprise of writing history as it has been practised for the last several hundred years is fatally flawed because of the ways in which it handles chronology. The first problem arises in the attempt to separate present time from the past. The second problem is the convention of dividing the past into periods, such as the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. In making these divisions, de Certeau says, historians create a period in which they judge whatever preceded it to be dead. There is a ‘breakage’ involved in this kind of historical interpretation. ‘In the past from which it is distinguished, it promotes a selection between what can be *understood* and what must be *forgotten* in order to obtain the representation of a present intelligibility.’ Rather than being a simple and objective methodological device to promote clarity, de Certeau sees these divisions into periods as an ideological tool peculiar to Western imperialism. He gives some examples of the attitude to the past held in India, Madagascar and Dahomey to show that in these non-Western societies the past remains alive within the present and that new forms never drive out the old. In separating the past from the present and dividing the past into periods, de Certeau says, historians perform an act of oppression. They do this because they thereby define some peoples and some human practices as irrelevant, outdated or inferior.

De Certeau includes among those who perpetuate this kind of oppression a number of French radicals who had thought themselves to be on the same side as the oppressed. He accuses Michel Foucault, through the act of selecting documents about the imprisoned and the insane for his histories of prisons and mental asylums, to have turned the meaning of the documents to his own ends rather than to those of the incarcerated. He accuses the structuralist anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss of climbing to academic prominence on the backs of the tribes he studied. ‘The Bororos of Brazil sink slowly into their collective death, and Levi-Strauss takes his seat in the French Academy. Even if this injustice disturbs him, the facts remain unchanged.’ De Certeau uses the terms ‘heterologies’, ‘discourses on the other’ and ‘discourses of separation’ to describe the practices of virtually all historians and anthropologists, as well as those of academics in the fields of psychiatry, pedagogy and modern medicine. All these heterologies are ‘built upon a division between the body [begin page 35] of knowledge that utters a discourse and the mute body that nourishes it’. However, despite all the academic oppression of the non-literate ‘other’ of the colonies, de Certeau maintains that their alternative understandings can never be completely eliminated.
But whatever this new understanding of the past holds to be irrelevant — shards created by the selection of material, remainders left aside by an explication — comes back, despite everything, on the edges of discourse or in its rifts and crannies: ‘resistances’, ‘survivals’, or delays discreetly perturb the pretty order of a line of ‘progress’ or a system of interpretation.67

He describes this phenomenon as ‘the return of the repressed’. He believes it is impossible to completely repress since the repressed will always find a way through which to ‘return’. He maintains that the critic of history can assist this by an examination of the processes of historical writing. By questioning the theoretical basis of the text, the auspices under which it was written, the status of the documents it consults and its relation to other books in its field, and by generally showing how histories are produced, their weaknesses can be exposed. Careful examination of the texts, especially the ‘shards’ they create and the remainders they leave aside, can allow the critic to find the holes through which the forgotten voices can ‘return’ to right the wrongs of history.

De Certeau’s work is couched in the typical obscurantism, linguistic idealism and inept metaphor of much recent French theory, but there is nonetheless a legitimate point buried beneath it all. This is that a great deal of the history of European expansion in the past two hundred years has been written from a strictly European perspective. For example, until 1970 almost all Australian historiography was written in terms of the ‘settlement’ and ‘development’ of the country by Europeans. Even those left-wing historians who criticised the process did so on the grounds that the local white working class had not got a fair share of the spoils. The Aboriginal perspective, and the often shocking and disgraceful story of how Aborigines were treated, was omitted entirely. Since 1970, however, there has been a great deal of history writing done to correct this and to try to see Australian history through Aboriginal eyes. So, today, the question is not one of whether the views of this repressed ‘other’ should return or be revived. It is more an issue of whether this return can be legitimately accomplished through the tools of traditional historiography, or whether the historical methodology nurtured by the imperial power is so hopelessly compromised that it is useless for the task. A further question is whether there could be a postcolonial methodology consistent with de Certeau’s theories that would offer a more fruitful and valid alternative.

The closest example to something along the latter line of which de Certeau might have approved is the work of Paul Carter on the origins of European [begin page 36] settlement in Australia. Carter’s writings are examined in Chapter Four of this book where they are compared with approaches to the same subject matter made by the ‘imperial history’ to which he, like de Certeau, is so opposed. While the verdict reached in Chapter Four is flattering to neither Carter nor, by implication, de Certeau, it is nonetheless clear that this is hardly likely to dent the enthusiasm of the postcolonial writing movement. It has now reached the stage where its adherents are certain to continue to offer critiques of existing historiography as well as works of their own that repudiate the practices of the traditional discipline.

ALL THE THEORIES described here have been applied to the production of historical works over the past decade. The next five chapters provide a number of highly celebrated and, in some cases, powerful examples of this. I am not giving anything away by reporting here that the conclusion I reach in every one of these chapters is that the result is deplorable in terms of the traditional practice of history. While there are specific reasons for this in each case, the summaries of the theories provided above should be enough to indicate that there are three common qualities that all, or nearly all, of them share which make them jointly culpable. First, they reject those aspects of the scientific method of the Enlightenment that were based on observation and inductive argument. They consequently reject works of history that are based on the same principles. Second, they all hold a relativist view of the concepts of truth and knowledge. Most deny that we can know anything with certainty, and believe that different cultures create their own truths. Third, most deny the ability of human beings to gain any direct contact with or access to reality. Instead, they support a form of linguistic idealism that holds that we are locked within a closed system of language and culture, which refers not beyond our minds to an outside world but only inwardly to itself.
Despite the urgings of those who claim that greater adoption of theory would enrich history, the widespread acceptance of any one of these last three points would be enough to kill off the discipline, as it has been practised, for good. The first undermines the methodology of historical research; the second destroys the distinction between history and fiction; the third means not only that it is impossible to access the past but that we have no proper grounds for believing that a past independent of ourselves ever took place. In other words, if historians allow themselves to be prod- ded all the way to this theoretical abyss, they will be rendering themselves and their discipline extinct.

4 Stephen Knight, The Selling of the Australian Mind, William Heinemann Australia, Melbourne, 1990, p 181
13 Paper by Associate Professor Terry Threadgold, University of Sydney, to Law and Literature Association of Australia’s second annual conference, Monash University, Melbourne, September 1991
16 For one of the seminal discussions of the application of Foucault’s theory to accounting, standard costing and budgeting see Peter Miller and Ted O’Leary, ‘Accounting and the Construction of the Governable Person’, Accounting, Organisations and Society, 12, 3, 1987, pp 235-65
17 Nicholas Fox, Postmodernism, Sociology and Health, Open University Press, Buckingham, 1993
18 Cary Nelson, Paula A. Treichler and Lawrence Grossberg, ‘Cultural Studies: An Introduction’, in Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula A. Treichler (eds), Cultural Studies, p 1
19 Cary Nelson, Paula A. Treichler and Lawrence Grossberg, Cultural Studies, p 1
20 Cary Nelson, Paula A. Treichler and Lawrence Grossberg, Cultural Studies, p 4
21 Cary Nelson, Paula A. Treichler and Lawrence Grossberg, Cultural Studies, p 15
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22 Cary Nelson, Paula A. Treichler and Lawrence Grossberg, *Cultural Studies*, p 14


24 ‘Introduction’ to Annabel Patterson, *Reading Between the Lines*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1994


26 Cary Nelson, Paula A. Treichler and Lawrence Grossberg, *Cultural Studies*, p 1


32 H. Aram Veeser, ‘Introduction’ p xi

33 H. Aram Veeser, ‘Introduction’ p xiii


35 C.J. Reynolds, ‘Poststructuralism at Sydney’, in Barbara Caine, Brian Fletcher, Meg Miller, Ros Pesman and Deryck Schreuder (eds.), *History at Sydney, 1891-1991: Centenary Reflections*, History Department, University of Sydney, Sydney, 1991

36 A relatively clear explanation of Saussure’s theories is provided in Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, Methuen, London, 1977


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39 All references to Foucault’s works are given in Chapter Five


41 There are literally dozens of works written to explain what postmodernism is about but most leave the uninformed reader more confused than when he or she started. For those with some familiarity with contemporary social theory, the most helpful general survey is Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1991


43 Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, University of Minneapolis Press, Minneapolis, 1984

44 Hal Foster (ed.), *Postmodern Culture*, Pluto Press, London, 1983, especially essays by Kenneth Frampton on architecture, Rosalind Krauss on sculpture and Douglas Kripn on art


48 Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory*

42 THE KILLING OF HISTORY


52 Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (eds), The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literature, Routledge, London, 1989, p 2

53 Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge, ‘What is post(-)colonialism?’, in John Frow and Meaghan Morris (eds) Australian Cultural Studies: A Reader, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1993, pp 30-46. Mishra and Hodge’s essay is critical of this tendency in The Empire Writes Back and in the work of Stephen Slemon


56 Mudrooroo Narogin, Writing from the Fringe: A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1990


59 Representations, Winter 1991

60 Michel de Certeau, ‘Travel narratives of the French to Brazil: Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries’; and Luce Giard, ‘Epilogue: Michel de Certeau’s Heterology and the New World’, both in Stephen Greenblatt (ed.), New World Encounters

61 Michel de Certeau, The Writing of History, pp xxv-xxvi, his italics

62 Michel de Certeau, The Writing of History, p 10

63 Michel de Certeau, The Writing of History, p 4, his italics

64 Michel de Certeau, Heterologies, p 191

65 Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, p 25

66 Michel de Certeau, The Writing of History, p 3

67 Michel de Certeau, The Writing of History, p 4